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Boer settlers fight Zulus at Weenen

THE STRUGGLE FOR THE CAPE

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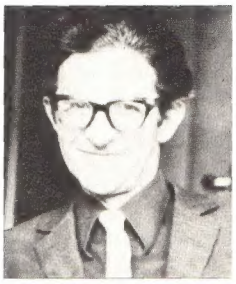

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Published by Time-Life/BBC.
Printed in England by Jarrold and Sons Ltd. Norwich.

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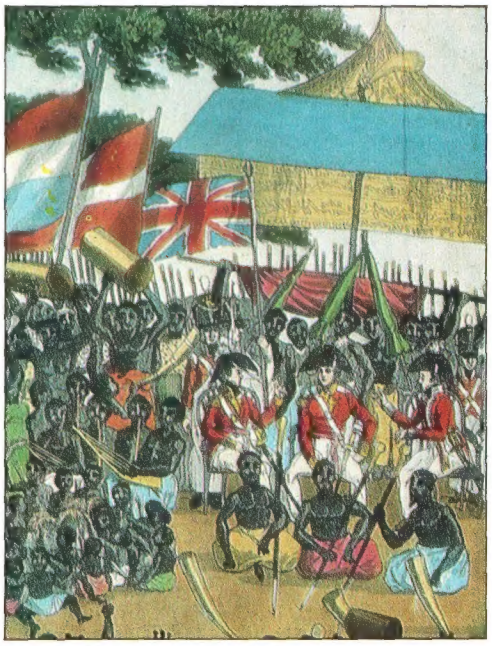

Issue No. 20: Into the Dark Continent. Spurred on by a thirst for knowledge, British explorers risk – and often lose – their lives to reveal unknown West Africa.

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Cover: Zulus assault Boer settlers in Natal in 1838. Several hundred Boers were killed and the spot was later named Weenen – "weeping" – to commemorate the terrible memory of that event.

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THE STRUGGLE FOR THE CAPE

South Africa in the early 19th Century was a pioneering community with its own "wild west" frontier. Land-hungry Dutch settlers – the Boers – had been moving inland ever since the first settlement at the Cape was founded in 1652. And by the time the British seized the colony in 1795, frontier Boers were already hunting down indigenous Hottentots and Bushmen in the northern border areas. When the British tried to enforce a humanitarian native policy in the 1830s, the stubbornly independent Boers trekked further away into the boundless interior. There they clashed with other, fiercer African peoples of Bantu stock and suffered an appalling massacre at the hands of the ferocious young Zulu nation. The Boers avenged themselves for this defeat, and then founded their own independent republics; by the mid-19th Century they were ready to defy any British attempt to subject them once again to imperial rule.

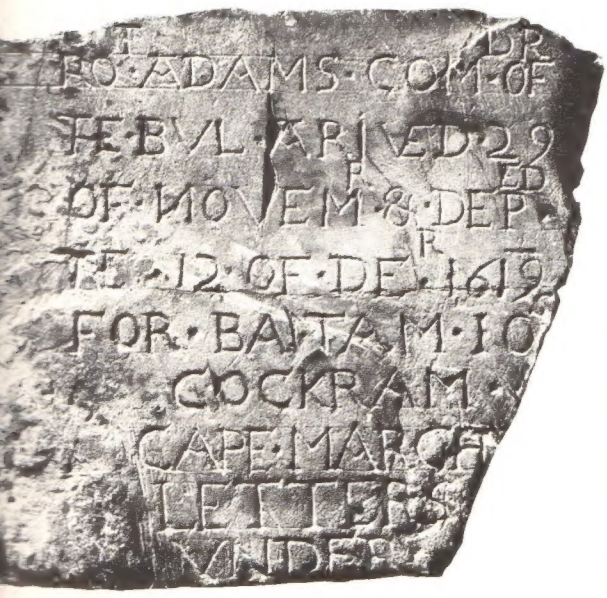
By David Lytton

A summer-house in Kew Gardens, London, on a mild spring day in 1795: the indecisive Prince of Orange was worrying over a piece of paper before him. The shock of exile was still fresh and he had not yet recovered fully from a hurried Channel crossing as he fled from the invading armies of Revolutionary France. His country was under foreign occupation and no longer even known as the Dutch Republic: the conquering French had rechristened it the Batavian Republic. Now he was being asked to sign away his colonies to Britain who wished to stop them falling into French enemy hands. The British were especially interested in the Dutch-held Cape, which commanded the route to their growing Empire in the East. He toyed with the piece of paper. Powerless, he had no option but to sign it and satisfy his hosts.

By that small movement of the pen he did far more than give Britain a base on the route to India: he set in train events which soon transformed the Cape from the mere victualling-post it had been for 300 years into a nation in its own right.

It would be a strange and troubled country, for it lacked the vital element of national unity, being divided from the start between the austere Dutch-speaking Boers, the incoming British settlers and the indigenous population.

Stones like this served as post-boxes for merchant seamen calling at the Cape before Europeans settled there. "Letters under," reads the message inscribed by the "sender."



Though the Portuguese had been first on the spot in 1496, they were intent only on getting silks and spices out of the East Indies. The voyage to the East took six months or more. Food and water could not be kept fresh so it was necessary to have a half-way house to replenish the larder. So Portuguese ships would sometimes anchor in Table Bay and leave letters under large flat stones for homeward-bound ships to pick up and deliver.

When the Portuguese trading empire fell into decline, the rising Dutch merchants took over and built up an even larger trade, in pepper and silk, with the East. To provide for the passing ships, the Dutch East India Company established a little settlement in 1652 under the shadow of Table Mountain. It was intended to be nothing more than a farm to grow vegetables and raise cattle, with a fort to protect property from the local Hottentot tribesmen. Despite the efforts of the Dutch East India Company to limit the settlement, it grew. Children were born and grew up knowing no other country. Thinking of it as theirs, they wanted to govern it themselves. Most of the people were farmers and, the Dutch word for "farmer" being *boer*, they came to be known as "the Boers."

As their numbers grew the Company had increasing trouble with them. The Boers would not accept the fact that they were simply the branch office of a commercial enterprise. They claimed the right to make their own laws and sell their produce to anyone who called at the Cape at prices which they should determine. Eventually, the Company went bankrupt and the Dutch government took over the management of the Cape until the Prince of Orange gave it away.

On June 11, 1795, nine British men-of-war dropped anchor in Simon's Bay and sent ashore a message that they had come to take over the management until France had been dealt with, after which they would immediately leave. The commanders of this expedition expected no resistance and began lowering away their boats to disembark the 1,600 men they had brought. But the Boers saw this as a good moment to make a bid for complete independence from all further outside intervention. They collected their guns and came down to the beaches to resist the invasion of their country.

So began what could be called the first Boer War. It was certainly the first war

By the 18th Century, the tiny Dutch settlement at the Cape provided a welcome resting-place for sailors of all nations, especially for British seamen on the six-month voyage to or from India.

fought by these enterprising inhabitants of a new land. From this moment in 1795, the British were regarded as invaders.

After a month of skirmishing, the Boer militiamen, who were largely volunteers, realized that they were outclassed by the redcoated professionals, and so they dispersed and made their way back to their farms. The British hoisted the Union Jack over the castle in Cape Town and set about convincing the Boers that they bore them no malice and were only temporary residents. In this they were ably assisted by the personality of Lady Anne Barnard, the Secretary of the Colony's wife. In the absence of the Governor's wife, she was the First Lady in Cape Town and she exercised to the full the very remarkable qualities of wit and intellect which had attracted much attention in London – from the Prince Regent, Dr. Samuel Johnson, Pitt, Sheridan, Burke, Walpole and Reynolds, the painter, among others. At the Cape, Lady Anne wooed the Boers with frequent dances and receptions and "by placing herself in sympathy with all she addressed." Since she constructed her guest-lists to include people from all stations in life, she had a broadly based audience to which "to show the Dutch the very best and most genteel aspects of English life and customs" – which was the purpose behind her generous hospitality.

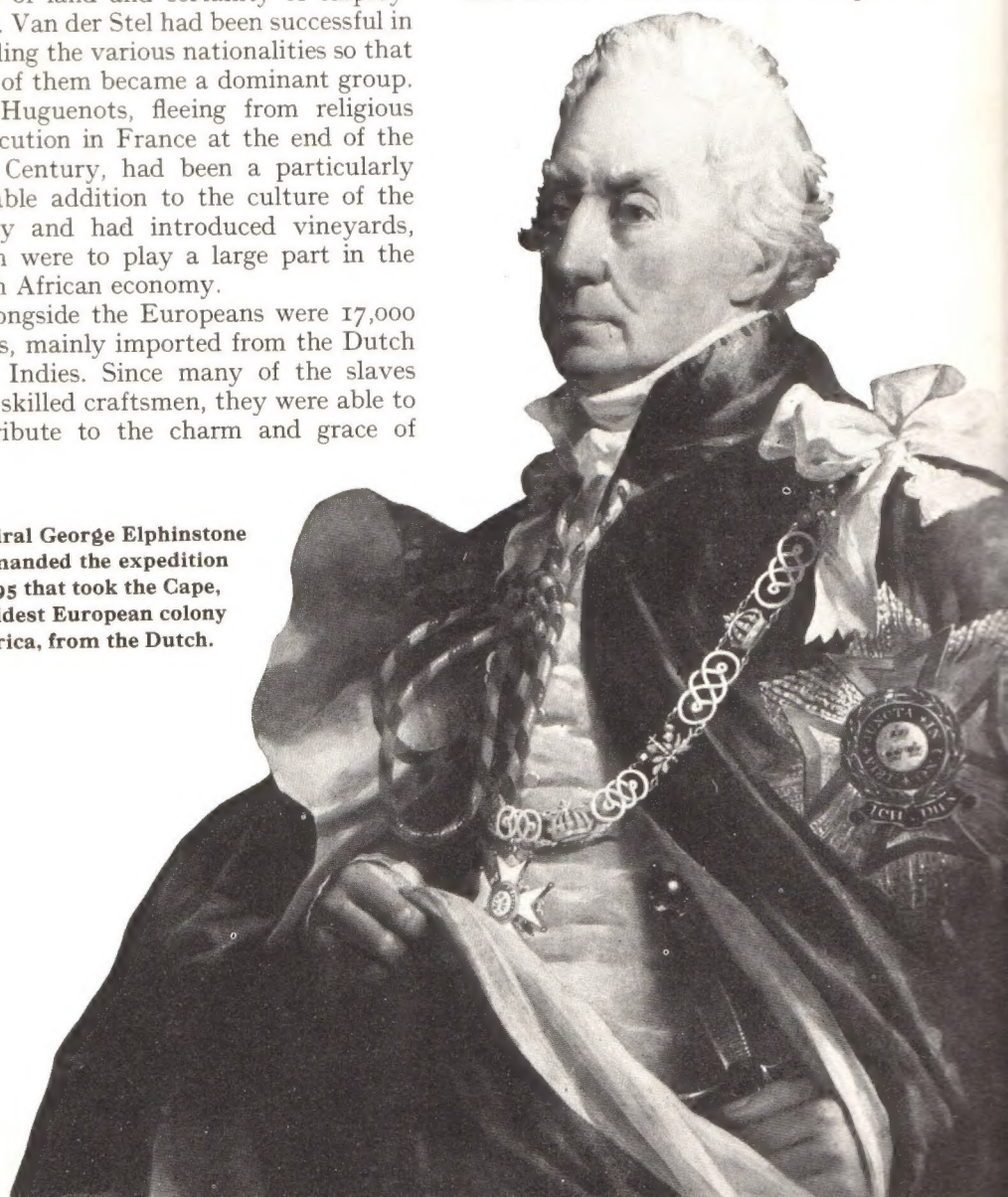
The British gave further evidence of their good intentions: they removed many of the previous restrictions on internal trade that had been imposed by the Dutch East India Company; lifted the duty on imports; reduced taxation; and cancelled some crippling monopolies which had artificially inflated the home market. With these benign gestures, the British settled down comfortably in the mild climate to watch the sea-lanes and to study this peculiar, remote outpost of European civilization.

The settlement at that time consisted of some 16,000 white people of Dutch, German and French Huguenot extraction. Interspersed in the predominantly agricultural community was a good proportion of skilled artisans who had been attracted by the generous immigration system devised by the former Dutch Governor, Simon van der Stel. His scheme included assisted passages, promises of land and certainty of employment. Van der Stel had been successful in mingling the various nationalities so that none of them became a dominant group. The Huguenots, fleeing from religious persecution in France at the end of the 17th Century, had been a particularly valuable addition to the culture of the colony and had introduced vineyards, which were to play a large part in the South African economy.

Alongside the Europeans were 17,000 slaves, mainly imported from the Dutch East Indies. Since many of the slaves were skilled craftsmen, they were able to contribute to the charm and grace of Cape architecture. There were also the few thousand indigenous Hottentots, generally regarded as "an indolent, faithless rabble," whose principal activity was stealing. Most people avoided them because of the strongly smelling fat with which they smeared themselves.

The peculiar racial mixture was completed by one more ingredient – the half-caste. It was almost inevitable that this should have happened: the Cape, after all, was the first shore-leave sailors had in a three-month outward-bound voyage.

On the borders of this strange society hovered the Bushmen. They were a small-statured, yellow-skinned people who, for something like 250,000 years, had had all southern Africa to themselves. Ignorant of metallurgy, they used stone tools and weapons and lived in the manner of the Late Stone Age. They roamed the land in small family groups, possessing nothing that could not conveniently be carried by each man, never killing more than was needed for their requirements and rarely at odds with each other. They called themselves "The Harmless People."



Admiral George Elphinstone commanded the expedition of 1795 that took the Cape, the oldest European colony in Africa, from the Dutch.

THE EDGE OF CIVILIZATION

Pressing into South Africa's arid uplands, Boer pioneers found the Bushmen, a diminutive native people so primitive that they were treated as animals and killed by the thousand. Then, in the 1850s, Englishmen like G.W.Stow, a geologist who made these copies of Bushman rock paintings, and the globe-trotting artist Thomas Baines realized how fascinating were these vanishing people and their simple culture.

This rock painting shows some of the game Bushmen hunted and several of the tribesmen, among them women carrying weighted sticks for digging up roots. Their outsize buttocks evolved to store fat which was reabsorbed during lean times.

Four Bushmen in sleeveless leather jackets (centre) stand ready with full quivers to hunt a herd of eland, a type of large antelope. On the right, women wearing birds-head costumes stand ready for a ritual dance.

A Bushman drinks through a cane at a Kalahari water-hole in this sensitive drawing by Thomas Baines.

A People Content With Solitude

The Bushmen had adapted themselves for survival in one of nature's harshest regions, the Kalahari Desert. At night they hollowed small holes in the ground to escape the bitter winds that swept the wastelands. And to preserve a steady food supply, they would if necessary abandon babies to cut down numbers.

Yet they were not bowed by adversity. They sang, danced, painted on rocks, recounted myths, made beads of ostrich-egg shell and regarded animals, which they believed could once speak, as friends.

But in the early 19th Century their solitary life was threatened by white men pushing north from the Cape and by warring African tribes streaming south and west away from the expansionist Zulus. The Bushmen in self-protection, retreated farther into the remote Kalahari, where they still live largely untouched.

A Bushman mural shows two Bantu tribes, ousted from their own territories

In this drawing of 1862 by Thomas Baines, a Bushman carries not only spears but also a Bantu shield and a European-made metal container, signs that his traditional way of life was being undermined by other, more powerful cultures.

by the rise of the Zulu Empire, battling with knobkerries and cumbersome shields over territory that was once the sole preserve of the Bushmen.

II. A Patchwork of Peoples

In a time roughly dated as the 10th Century, an African people who were taller than the Bushmen, who knew the use of iron and, most important, who were cattle-owners, had begun moving south. Cattle turn large areas of land into arid wastes. Each time this happens, the cattle-owners are compelled to move their herds to new territory. Their owners must be armed, live in large social units and have some form of military organization. Exactly where these cattle-owners – the Bantu – came from is not known. Some certainly came from Egypt – possibly from even farther away to the north.

This invasion continued over the centuries, wave after wave, until in the 17th Century the Bantu came up against the first groups of white cattle-owners. These were the Boers who were probing northwards from the Cape. They, too, were looking for greener and more abundant grass. Moreover, these white-skins shot the game indiscriminately and in far larger numbers than they could possibly eat, depriving the Bushman of his food-supply. However, when he went and helped himself to the white man's cattle, the white man started to shoot him and in fact added the hunting of Bushmen to his list of recreations. For Boers, the primitive Bushmen could not be regarded as part of the human order. Therefore, it was perfectly justifiable to shoot them. So the Bushmen were squeezed between the southward migrations of the black-skinned Bantu and the northward migrations of the white-skinned Boers. In pursuit of survival the Bushmen took themselves off to the empty desert to their west. There in the wastes of the Kalahari they have managed to survive.

This then was the racial and geographic situation of the country which the British found. It contained too many elements of disturbance for their peace of mind. The northward-moving Boers were already in conflict with southward-moving Bantu. The last thing the British wanted during this temporary occupation of 1795 was the trouble of internal conflicts. They suggested, therefore, that a halt should be called to the Boers' northward movement. They fixed a boundary, the Great Fish River, some 500 miles east of Cape Town, as the limit of the Cape Colony and requested both Bantu and Boer to respect it as a division between their tenures.

On paper this was a sensible, pragmatic arrangement. But cows do not respect paper; when they strayed across the border they tended to become absorbed in other herds. Their owners naturally sought to recoup their losses. Border raids by Bantu and Boer were frequent and there were no effective ways of preventing them without colossal expenditure on boundary forts and troops.

Before matters became too hot, the British were relieved of their responsibilities in the affairs of Boer and Bantu by the Treaty of Amiens in 1802, a peace signed by the warring continental powers who desperately needed a breathing-space in which to heal the wounds of their long conflict. The Cape was handed back to the Dutch and Lady Anne Barnard packed her Staffordshire china and returned to London society.

Dutch control was now exercised far more loosely than before, and the Boers began to feel they were on the way to being their own masters again. They also began to think of themselves as South African rather than as Europeans in southern Africa. Moreover, since the word "Boer" did not carry much dignity, they began to emphasize their national identity by styling themselves "Afrikaners," a

This 1803 view of a Boer's charming, Dutch-style house creates the illusion of a piece of Europe nestling in the hills behind Cape Town. But the Boer grazing his flocks here suffered very un-European hardships in the form of locusts, plagues and marauding native tribes.

A Boer returning from a successful hunt exemplifies the ease with which Europeans with guns could outdo – and thus dominate – the local population in the search for food.

proud name meaning men of Africa.

They had developed a fierce pride in the land which they had to some measure tamed and made productive. The bones of several generations of their ancestors lay in neat, white-walled churchyards around which their communities were grouped.

The church was almost always the first thing the Boers built in each new settlement, for they considered their religion to be their strongest defence against the inimical elements of this barbarous and severe land.

The Afrikaners' God was the stern disciplinarian of the Old Testament, the vengeful deity who demanded an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and had distinct preferences, it appeared, about the kind of people who should represent him on earth. To the Afrikaners, it was apparent that, just as he had once made the Israelites his chosen people he had now selected the Afrikaners for some strange but divine destiny. Their approach to biblical interpretation derived from the theology of John Calvin, one of the Protestant reformers of the 16th Century who had been in the forefront of the movement that smashed the supremacy of the Roman Catholic Church. Calvinists preached a return to what they considered the true nature and proper austerity of the Christian message. The doctrine was Puritan in the extreme. It emphasized that redemption was predestined for God's elect and no amount of good works in this life could win it for those who had not been chosen.

The South African version of Calvinism asserted that there was a clear distinction between God's chosen leaders, the Afrikaners, and the black inhabitants, who were destined to be inferior beings. God had expressly decreed in Genesis: "cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren." To Afrikaners, it was incontestable that all coloured people were descended from Canaan, and were therefore destined by God to serve.

The Afrikaners' feeling of uniqueness, their unbending religious beliefs, and their mastery of the environment and of its people all reinforced their conviction that they had been placed in their land for some special purpose and that all interference with that purpose must necessarily be against the good Lord's wishes. For what other reason had he so tested them and sent them the tribulations of this capricious climate and given them the will and strength to master it?

It was a reassuring philosophy, but it was soon put to the test. For the British, impelled by events in Europe, sailed back once again into Simon's Bay in 1806, this time with 63 ships. War had broken out once more between France and half Europe. Napoleon's fleet had been defeated at Trafalgar, but he was still supreme on the Continent and potentially dangerous elsewhere. The British, in order to forestall any attempt by Napoleon to seize the Cape, seized it themselves. Possession of the Cape would also make the British masters of the southern oceans and enable them to protect the route to their Indian Empire, where their interests increasingly lay.

The Afrikaners greeted the newly arrived British forces without joy, assembling a comparable force of their own to repel the invaders. But strangely, when the redcoats landed, the Cape Governor decided to offer no serious opposition and the British quickly gained control.

Sheltering in an austere camp, Boers rest during a trek, the habitual migration in search of the vast pasturelands in the interior to which every frontier Boer felt himself entitled.

COLONIZING THE CAPE

When Britain occupied the Cape, London clubs and drawing-rooms began to hum with talk about the colony. A London publisher rushed out an edition of letters, illustrated by these engravings, from a British resident in that now "celebrated Dutch settlement." The publisher cautiously hoped they would be "a fund of valuable instruction and rational amusement" for the soldiers and settlers who, as the following pages show, were soon arriving at the remote tip of Africa.

Boers threshed corn by the odd method of driving frisky colts over the wheatsheaves.

oer colonists halt their light hunting-cart to shoot the ample game – steenboks and grysboks – springing from the thicket on every side.

Boers going to market in ox-wagons revelled in the skill required to crack the 20-foot, two-handed whip.

Boer ploughs were large, clumsy devices which required at least six oxen to pull them and left ragged trenches for furrows.

New Home Across the Stormy Seas

The British sent 6,700 troops to occupy the Cape in 1806, and then when peace came to Europe in 1814, they paid £6,000,000 to the Dutch in compensation. Not surprisingly, London wished to settle some of the country with its own people.

In 1820, 4,000 men, women and children, mostly with state-aided passages, arrived off the South African coast. Their arrival doubled the English-speaking population at the Cape.

Scanning the warm, sunlit shores, the settlers thankfully put behind them the 90 days of stuffy misery, the sour reek of urine and the ghastly food on board ship. Awaiting them on land were wooden storehouses, stacks of agricultural implements and ironware that had been sent up from Cape Town by the colonial government. Soon the British pioneers were moving off in laden bullock-wagons, hired from Afrikaner frontiersmen, to a new life in the Albany area in the interior. There, said the Governor, lay "the most fertile and beautiful part of the settlement." The settlers' hopes were high; British rule, they thought, had brought a guarantee of wealth. Even female slaves in Cape Town were wearing silk stockings and fashionable pointed shoes.

Tossed in the angry waters of Algoa Bay (left), settlers from Britain board a surf-boat from their ships' dinghies while sailors steady it on a cable leading from the beach. Ashore, a reception camp provided shelter until the newcomers of 1820 set out inland.

After 1820, Royal Navy warships calling at Table Bay soon became a common sight. As British shipping increased, many travellers – naval surgeons, merchants, officers – chose to stay. Gradually the Cape became more British in character.

Beaux and Bumpkins from Britain

Life at the Cape was not all silk stockings and pointed shoes, as the 1820 settlers soon discovered. For them it was country bonnets and tatty boots, if that. The Governor's remarks about the inland settlement area of Albany – "most fertile and beautiful. . . . A succession of parks" – proved quite untrue. He had, in fact, never been there, and intended to use the new settlement, which lay in an area of continuous racial unrest, as a barrier against raiding tribesmen.

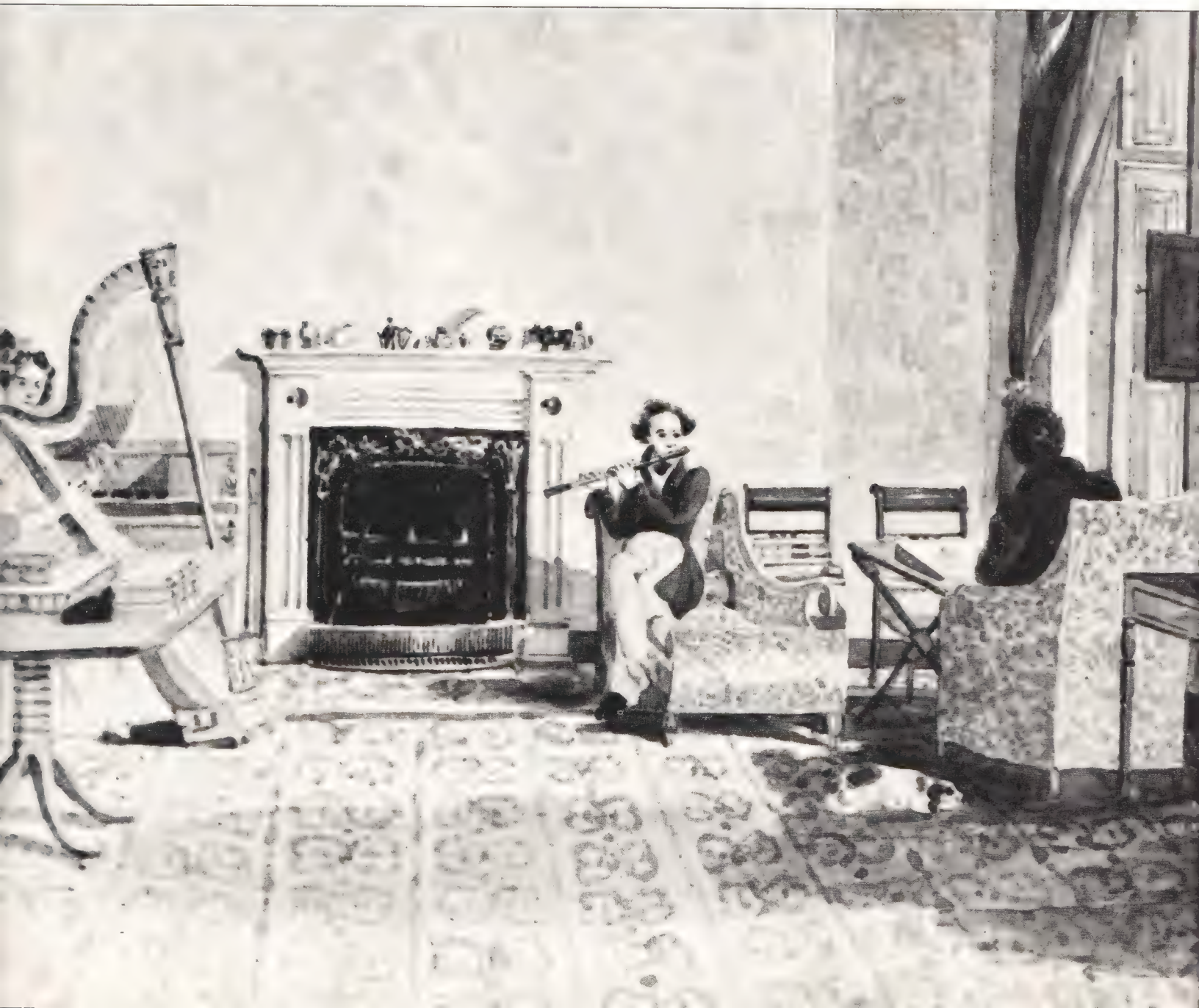
When the newcomers arrived to take up their land grants, they found a wild land where lions, leopards and hyenas prowled. The ground was sour and the wheat harvests failed in four successive years, hopelessly ruined by rust, a virulent crop disease, or devoured by plagues of locusts. In three years Bantu raiders stole 3,600 cattle and in 1834 a Bantu force 17,000 strong invaded, killing many and destroying property worth £300,000.

Despite these calamities, most of the settlers toiled on for a meagre subsistence. Some of them even made good, but dire poverty drove others to become wage-earners in the towns.

There, at least, stories of a new prosperity under the British were true. In lively, cosmopolitan Cape Town, there was a boom in the latest springed carriages and Parisian confectionary, while smart hotels catered for British army officers from Bengal or Madras who spent long holidays at the Cape. To the local people, the officers' wealth was staggering: they brought with them their own packs of hounds and so many racehorses that a barracks had to be converted to stables. They spent £60,000 a year at the Cape and well-to-do Dutch burghers, who thought them "fair game for pillage," made haste to marry their daughters to gentlemen of such vast private means.

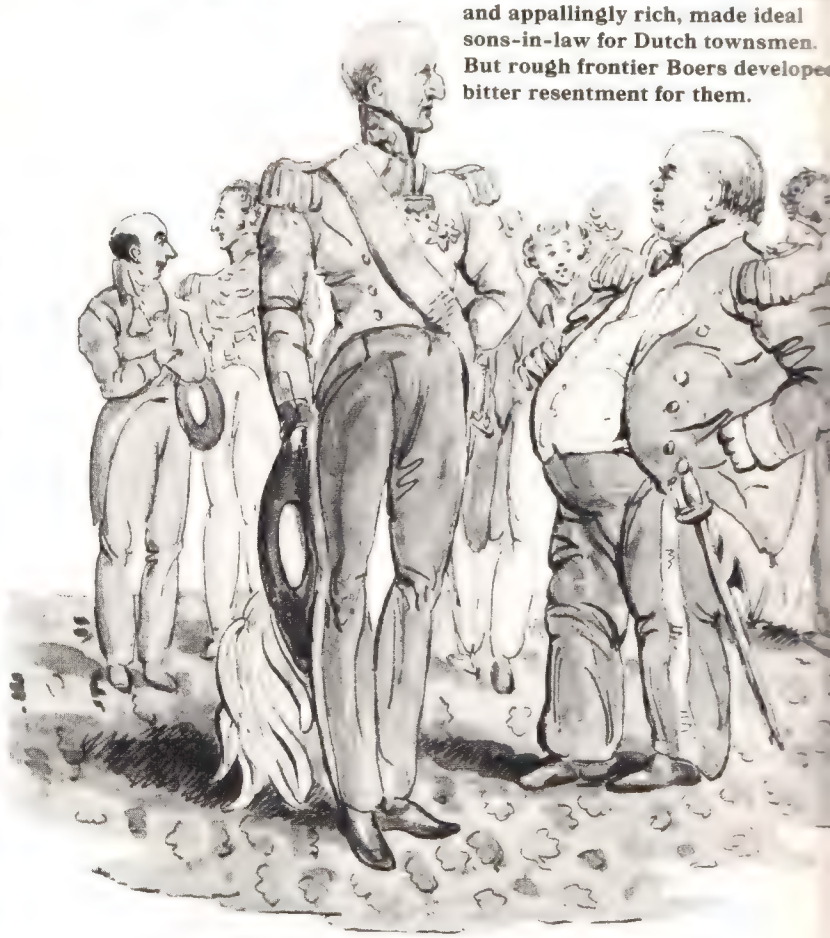
The arrival of piano-teachers, butlers, seamstresses and shoemakers from Britain began to smooth the rough edge of a society previously dominated by Boers. Theatres opened. London styles became all the rage. "Our houses," wrote one Boer, "which so lately were crowded with the heavy Dutch furniture, now have the light elegant appearance of a London residence." Decorative fireplaces were introduced for the burning of coal imported from Newcastle.

Despite the abominable smell from the open sewers and despite the clouds of reddish dust which whirled off the unsurfaced streets into the houses, Cape Town fulfilled the dream of prosperity for at least some Albany settlers.



Mr. and Mrs. Quinn were artisans, like many of the British settlers who arrived in 1820, but the struggle for survival on the land imposed on them a peasant existence.

British officers like these, arrogant and appallingly rich, made ideal sons-in-law for Dutch townsmen. But rough frontier Boers developed bitter resentment for them.



A spacious drawing-room furnished tastefully in Georgian style and filled with the sound of a duet for flute and harp brought to Cape Town the genteel atmosphere of Jane Austen's England.

III. The Expanding Frontier

In 1814, with Napoleon defeated and exiled in Elba, the Prince of Orange returned to his own country, now freed from French control, and the Dutch demanded their colonies back. But Britain was adamant about keeping the Cape: she was determined never again to be in doubt about access to India. The following year, under the Act of the Congress of Vienna, she agreed to buy it. The total payment made to the Dutch was £6,000,000, and that included the purchase of the Dutch colonies in South America that later became British Guiana. On the surface, it looked cheap at the price.

The British statesmen might not have considered it such a bargain had they had a complete picture of the liabilities they were accepting. The Cape's economy was on the point of collapse. Paper money was being printed with abandon and inflation was so rampant that people had resorted to barter as the principal form of exchange. The frontier problem had become acute as more and more people had trekked away from the problems at the Cape itself to try and find a better way of life in the vast hinterland. The pressure for land was unremitting: Boers took it for granted that an average individual farmer needed 6,000 acres; each child – and 15 children in a family was no exception – had the same ideal. But they were finding that nothing in this land was as plentiful as it first appeared. The soil was thin and easily exhausted. Droughts occurred every second or third year and might last a twelvemonth. And the grazing requirements of their cattle led both black and whites to seek further expansions of territory, with the inevitable frictions and contested claims that arise between jealous neighbours.

Then, rubbing salt into an already festering wound, the British appointed, as one of the first Governors of their new acquisition, Lord Charles Somerset, a man who had the very highest opinion of himself. He was descended from the Plantagenet kings and was very obviously conscious of the fact.

Somerset descended on the Cape in 1814, accompanied by so large a household staff, so much furniture and so many horses that two ships were required to transport them. His authority, under his Letters Patent, was almost absolute. He was Governor, commander of the armed forces and Judge of the Appeal Court. His only overlord was the Secretary of State in Whitehall, with whom any exchange of letters took six months.

Somerset's family motto, "I scorn to change or to fear," was not the best omen for future relations with the Afrikaners. His staff was composed mainly of war-hardened men of Tory sympathies. Their social and political ideals were those of the bluff English country gentleman used to obedience from underlings. Besides, they were at the Cape as natural masters by right of conquest, and so were not likely to view the Afrikaners' claims to independence with sympathy.

The new Governor promptly began to interfere in Boer affairs. He clamped down on the Press and forbade "all meetings which might be for the purpose of discussing public measures and political subjects." Worst of all, from the Afrikaners' point of view, he decreed that the evidence of a black man or of a half-caste should have equal weight with that of a white man. In this he showed his awareness of the new, humanitarian climate of opinion in Britain, the Evangelical Revival that was already forging the high moral tone of mid-Victorian Puritanism. In particular, he could not ignore the Christian belief in the equality of all men before God, the popular battle-cry of men like William Wilberforce and other fighters in the campaign against slavery. But in South Africa, where racialist beliefs were as strong as anywhere in the colonial world and the economy rested heavily on slavery, such attitudes were dynamite. Especially when imposed with High Tory arrogance on a proud and obstinate people.

Almost immediately there occurred a tragic incident which was soon elevated into a symbol of British oppression. In 1815, a frontier farmer named Frederik Bezuidenhout was summoned by a court to answer charges of cruelty lodged against him by one of his coloured herdsmen. No such summons had ever been issued before, for coloured herdsmen had no standing or rights. The farmer ignored the summons. In his absence the court sentenced him to a month's imprisonment for contempt. A lieutenant with a platoon mainly composed of Hottentot recruits was sent to arrest him. To use black men to take a white man into custody was an indignity the farmer could not stomach and he reached for his rifle. In the ensuing fight he was shot dead.

Frontier passions burst into flame and wild plots were hatched to drive the British from the borderlands. Eventually, most of the Afrikaners who did take up arms surrendered to a vastly superior British force: a few fled into exile across the border. Of the 39 rebels who were tried for treason, five ringleaders were sentenced to be publicly hanged.

The execution at a small frontier post was an ugly affair. Four of the ropes snapped when the trap was dropped and the victims fell to the ground beneath the gallows, writhing in agony. Bystanders declared that the failed execution was a sign of God's displeasure with the sentence and demanded that the men should immediately be reprieved, but fresh ropes were sent for and the four prisoners were successfully done to death. By macabre coincidence, the site where the Afrikaners had confronted the British was called Slachter's Nek (Butcher's Neck) and that name thereafter stood high in the Afrikaners' catalogue of bitterness.

Worse was to come, for Somerset tried to strengthen the frontier by importing 4,000 British immigrants – the 1820 Settlers – and dumping them in the no-man's land between the white and black cattle-owners. No proper attempt was made to support the newcomers in the hardships they encountered. The frontier troubles continued and the Afrikaners grew more intractable, seeing the settlers as a further part of the wedge which would drive English ways deeper into their own developing culture.

The Afrikaner was extremely proud of what little tradition he had and of his customs and his language. Over the years he had slowly been adapting to the peculiar nature of his rugged country and the self-reliant life of the open spaces. He had already abandoned a great many European conventions as pointless for a backwoodsman. His original Dutch language had become a much more simplified patois, Afrikaans, absorbing many Malay, Hottentot and Bantu words. Even his religion had changed a great deal from the

form in which it had been practised in Holland. The Afrikaner felt with excitement that he was creating an entirely new nation. To have his customs and beliefs set aside or disregarded touched him where he was most sensitive and prepared to fight.

There were many other causes of Afrikaner disquiet. English immigrants brought with them the liberal ideas of reformers in their homeland and treated heathen black and Christian white as though there was no distinction between them. As British control hardened, all court proceedings were conducted in English, which the majority of Afrikaners could not and did not wish to speak. Also, in such schools as there were, English was the only language used. There was also an attempt to install English preachers in the churches; two Political Commissioners were appointed to the Synod, the governing body of the Church, to keep a close watch on the deliberations of its members for possible subversive talk.

A new clutch of decrees gave coloured men the same rights to land tenure as whites, forbade field labour on Sundays, regardless of harvest-time, and abolished previous laws against vagrancy. To the Afrikaners, this meant the release of a horde of shiftless Hottentots and half-castes – unemployed and mostly unemployable – to roam where they pleased and squat wherever they wanted.

There was also a new law concerning the recovery of stolen cattle. Previously, if some of his cattle had been stolen, the Afrikaner farmer had been allowed to take an equivalent number from the culprit's herd. Now, he could only retrieve those animals which could be seen, and personally identified in the presence of an official, as having been part of his herd.

The new law was felt to be both unjust and in nine cases out of ten impossible to apply. An increasingly ominous rumble of discontent was welling up in the Afrikaner communities – many indeed were already planning to trek north.

These grievances, joined with the everlasting need for more land, drove the Afrikaners to consider more seriously than ever before the habitual remedy when their neighbourhood had become too closely crowded or restricted: to pack their wagons and trek in search of freedom. Individuals had been solving their problems in this fashion since early in the time of Dutch East India Company rule. But never had there been treks by great numbers or for long distances.

The haughty Lord Somerset, Governor of the Cape in 1814, held notoriously autocratic attitudes – reputedly inspired by his strange mistress, "James Barry," a lady doctor who always posed in public life as a man.

The Afrikaners did not know what lay in the hinterland, but there were bound to be places which could support the kind of life they wanted and to which the British would have no inclination to follow. Let them keep the Cape. It was already too crowded. The Afrikaners would imitate the Israelites and go in search of a land of milk and honey.

There seemed indeed to be such a land. Up the east coast towards Natal, and inland beyond the Orange and Vaal rivers, the generous rainfall made the countryside seem a promised land in comparison with the arid grasslands nearer the Cape.

The last straw for Afrikaners, which hastened their exodus, came in the 1830s: all slaves were to be given complete freedom by December 1, 1838. A sum of £3,000,000 had been provided to compensate the slave-owners. But nothing could mitigate the shock of the decree, for slaves had been the chief source of labour since the founding of the colony, and these human chattels in most cases represented the Afrikaner's largest investment. Moreover, the Boer had always treated his slaves with the same exceptional care that he gave to all of his property. Both the law, which strictly regulated the treatment of slaves, and his own high regard for his possessions combined to preserve the usefulness and good health of the Afrikaner's slaves. Now to be told that this costly investment must simply be turned loose (and December fell in the middle of the harvest), for a nominal sum in compensation, was outrageous.

Even more so was the next news, that the sum of £3,000,000 had been cut in half and, worse still, the compensation would only be paid on personal appearance in London, a total of six months' travelling away, or through representation by an agent, whose commission would further reduce the compensation.

But the freeing of the slaves was not really significant as an economic imposition on the Boers: of the Boers in Cape Province – the more firmly established ones and also the ones who owned the most slaves – only two per cent trekked. The real importance of the decree was that it was the final unbearable challenge to the way of life of the frontier Boers of the eastern areas. "It is not so much their [the slaves'] freedom which drove us to such lengths," wrote one of them later, "as their being placed on an equal footing with Christians, contrary to the laws of God, and the natural distinction of race and colour, so that it was intolerable for any decent Christian to bow down beneath such a yoke."

It was time for any true-hearted Afrikaner to pack his wagon and put as much space as he could between himself and the "redneck" English.

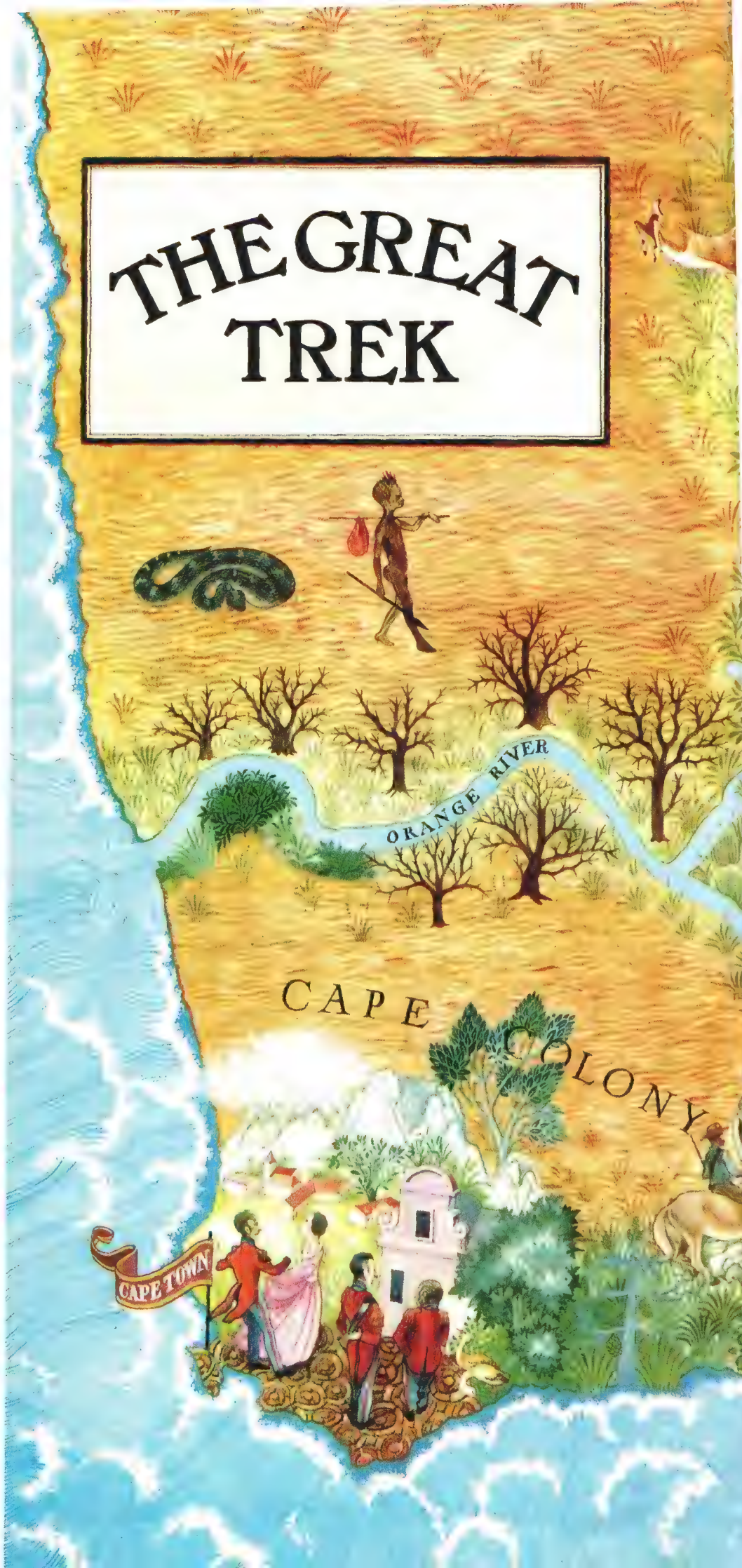
These wagons were remarkable vehicles that had been evolved to cope with the

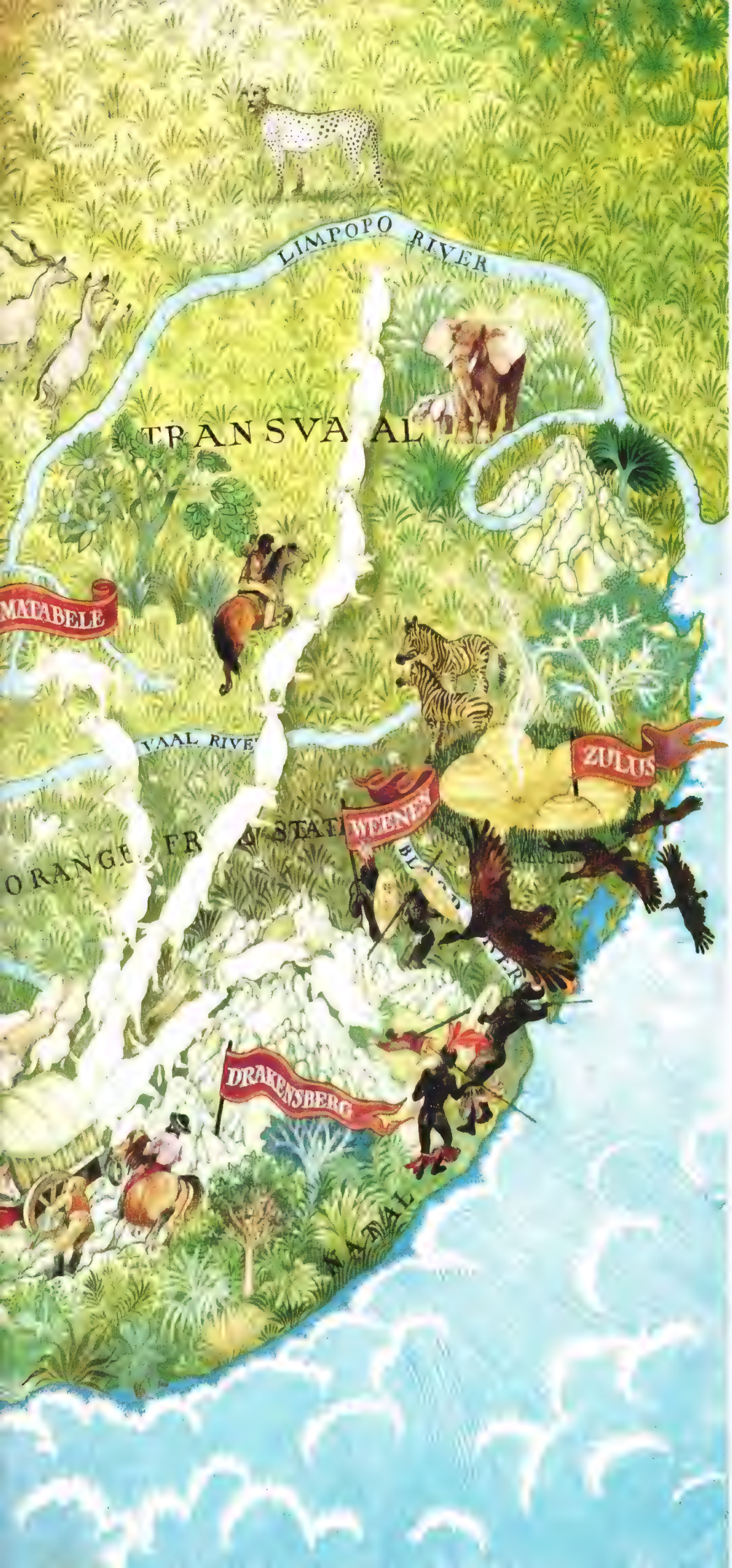
rugged terrain they were used in. They were generally 12 feet long and four feet wide. The five-foot rear wheels were nearly twice as large as the front ones, but all the wheels were tremendously strong to withstand the rough terrain over which they travelled. There was a large box at the front of the wagon body – the Bible box – which contained personal possessions, clothing, and of course the family Bible. There was another box at the back for provisions and sometimes two more slung on each side. Beds made of plaited reins were hung beneath the wagon during the day and might be left there at night or set up inside. Over the wagon body was a cover made of several layers of completely waterproof canvas, tough enough to resist a spear thrown from close quarters. To give light and air to the interior of the wagon, the canvas could be rolled back over the supporting hoops which were made of willow wood.

The Boer wagon was drawn by a carefully chosen team of oxen, each of which had a name and a special place in the traces. It was always a matter of pride to match up a good team in such a way that they all worked in harmony. They were led, not driven. A young boy always walked in front of the team, calling to the beasts by name to make this or that effort. Whoever sat up on the box had a long-lashed whip with which, by an expert flick, he could indicate to any beast that it was not pulling its weight. The team moved at about three miles an hour and it was very rare to cover more than ten miles a day. When the trekkers came to mountains or unfordable rivers, the whole wagon could be dismantled and carried or floated across the obstacles.

From 1836 to 1838, the years of the Great Trek, nearly a quarter of the European population of the Cape Colony – some 10,000 men, women and children –

In the years after 1836 some 10,000 Boers packed their wagons and trekked north in search of independence. In this specially commissioned map, which incorporates cameos of early 19th-Century South African history, streams of oxen haul Boers away from the pretentious British society at the Cape. East of the vast, arid Kalahari Desert, sparsely populated by the remnants of Bushmen tribes, the Boers establish three new republics. On the borders of Zululand, Boers and Zulus clash in the bloody round of massacre and revenge which marked the foundation and settlement of Natal.





took to these wagons to escape British domination. Most of them had been unable to sell their farms and had simply abandoned them, together with most of their possessions.

The trekkers moved north-east in trains of various sizes, their herds or cattle, sheep and goats trailing along behind. It was truly an exodus. The Voortrekkers, as they came to be known, had no very clear idea of their destination but they trusted blindly in God to lead them to a promised land. The British watched this mass migration with amazement and even awe, and while they did nothing to prevent it – even though it was illegal to leave Cape Colony without permission – they did not consider the odds in favour of survival in the wilderness were great.

This poignant migration brought forward certain men whose pronounced qualities of leadership set them apart from their fellows. There was Louis Trichardt, who had been a wealthy stock-farmer in the Cape. He had seen this situation coming for some time previously and had wisely done some exploring of the interior on his own. This knowledge was now invaluable and he was looked to for direction. He took his party of 100 up towards Delagoa Bay, in present-day Mozambique, where in 1838 most of the adults died of fever. The survivors eventually joined the main body of trekkers who had settled around Port Natal.

Another wealthy man, Andries Potgieter, was able to fit out a train of 50 wagons and provide it with an armed escort of 40 men, which gave him considerable authority in the conduct of affairs. He himself was a most impressive, patriarchal figure, deeply religious and with an enormous family, the result of having married five times.

Sarel Cilliers, an ex-Elder of the Church, had a dominating influence on the spiritual welfare of his group of trekkers (daily service round the wagons was a strict part of the routine). Gerrit Maritz, a wagon-maker and leader of another group showed exceptional foresight: he packed the only set of law books the trekkers had when they endeavoured to set up their separate republic.

Perhaps the most commanding figure, and certainly now the legendary embodiment of the Great Trek, was Piet Retief. This deeply thoughtful man was 57 when he decided to leave his home, and he

summed up the reasons for the Trek in the renowned manifesto which he made public in 1837. In it he declared: "We are resolved that wherever we go we shall uphold the just principles of liberty. . . . We shall molest no one, nor take away the smallest possessions of others, but we shall feel justified in defending our possessions and persons against any foe to the utmost of our being."

Once across the Orange River, which flows east to west across South Africa, the Voortrekkers were beyond the furthest reaches of British jurisdiction. A few decided that this was far enough and settled down in the flat lands to see whether they could make new homes there. The others, divided into two main groups, pressed on in different directions, one veering eastwards towards Natal, and the other pushing north to the next great natural obstacle, the Vaal River.

The Natal party had to surmount the formidable range of the Drakensberg Mountains which seal off the coastal area from the interior. This they achieved after a great deal of trial and error and enormous physical distress for the elderly and the sick who were strapped into stretchers and carried up and down the precipitous slopes. The wagons, after being laboriously hauled to the top of the range, were tobogganed down the other side. Over a thousand wagons were so transported and when the party assembled once again in the lush coastal land, they thanked God for their safety.

But they were not alone in their promised land, for Natal was dominated by the Zulu nation, soon to become the implacable foe of the Afrikaners.

At the beginning of the century the Zulus had been just one of more than 800 small clans, each averaging perhaps 1,500 souls, which dwelt cheek by jowl in the narrow coastal strip between the Drakensberg escarpment and the sea, jostling each other for water and pasturage in the rolling lowlands. The Chieftain of the Zulus, Senzangakona, had fathered an illegitimate son, named Shaka, by Nandi, a woman of a neighbouring clan. The Zulus took in mother and child, but Nandi was a troublesome woman and caused such difficulties that she and her infant son were soon sent back to her own clan. Nandi, an extra mouth to feed, was no more welcome there, and she and the young Shaka were subjected to endless humiliations and indignities. Embittered by his experience, Shaka, whose name was a contemptuous reference to his illegitimate birth, grew up trusting no one but his mother. At maturity, he was six feet three inches and immensely strong.

When he was 16, he and his mother had moved in with relatives, members of a tribe headed by a Paramount Chief named Dingiswayo to whom the Zulus owed allegiance. In time he was conscripted into Dingiswayo's army, and during his service he became known as a courageous fighter with some extremely ingenious ideas about fighting formations. Ultimately, he rose to command his regiment.

About 1816, Shaka's father, Senzagakona, died and was succeeded by his son, Sigujana. Dingiswayo saw in the accession of an inexperienced chief an opportunity to widen his sphere of power. Shaka's half-brother was sent to murder Sigujana, and Shaka then took over the Zulu chieftainship without opposition.

From the moment of Shaka's arrival, the Zulus left the ranks of the small clans and began their march to power and nationhood. The first thing Shaka did was to throw out traditional military tactics. The Zulus, like all members of the Bantu race, fought in formless mobs, armed with flimsy throwing assegais. Shaka had his own ideas about warfare and proceeded to revolutionize the Zulu Army. He subjected his soldiers to rigorous training and iron discipline. He made military service compulsory, and organized his army into regiments. Each regiment had a distinctive uniform of furs and feathered head-dresses. Shaka discarded the throwing assegais, and replaced them with stout stabbing assegais which, like the Roman short-sword, were hefted underhand and compelled close, hand-to-hand fighting. He made his warriors discard their sandals, and after their feet became toughened they were speedier afoot and far more mobile. Through rigorous training marches, he produced an infantry that could cover 60 miles a day in a time when European armies considered 15 miles a remarkable day's march.

Shaka devised standardized tactics. In battle he always divided his *impi* (the Zulu word for "army") into four groups. The strongest was called the "chest" and engaged the enemy mass to pin it down. Two groups called the "horns" raced out to surround the foe and attack from the rear. A reserve called the "loins" sat near by with their backs to the fight (so as not to become excited) and could be thrown in if the enemy threatened to break the encirclement.

Shaka fought not for victory alone but for extermination, and Bantu warfare passed from the ancient, mild skirmishing to a new level of viciousness, which was given its peculiar character by the nature of Shaka's leadership. He was undoubtedly a latent homosexual and he held his entire army in a state of enforced celibacy until the men passed their 40th birthday. Although he assembled a harem of 1,200 women, he never wore the headring of the married men; he referred to the women as his "sisters" rather than as his "wives," he never fathered a child and, he instantly slew every woman of his harem who became pregnant.

Shaka first fell on the small neighbouring clans, smashing them and incorporating the remnants into the Zulu Army. His mother's clan paid heavily for their treatment of her; Shaka sought out everyone who had ever slighted her and impaled them on the sharpened stakes of the fence round their *kraal* (the Boer word for a Zulu "village") before he set fire to the huts. After Dingiswayo's death in 1818, Shaka, whose army now numbered 40,000, ranged further and further afield, until within a few years he had broken the entire clan structure in Natal, sending a wave of refugees pouring south to fetch up against the frontier of the Cape Colony in the Transkei. The Zulu heartland, comprising the area from the Powgela River in the north to the Tugela in the south, was soon bordered by a wide belt of devastation, filled with the smoking ruins of kraals and almost totally depopulated except for small groups hiding in the bush, who resorted to cannibalism to survive.

Although Shaka was not directly responsible, the disorders he touched off spread to the inland plateau, where the clan structure collapsed into chaos. In a period in the early 1820s known as the "Mfecane" – the "crushing" – over two million Bantu died, and the old structure of small tribal groups was swept away. Two giant clans grew from the ashes of the old communities, the Basuto under Mshweshwe and the redoubtable Matabele under their savage leader Mizilikazi.

A WARRIOR SOCIETY

On the wild frontier, the greatest danger to white settlers came from a warrior-nation, the Zulus. Trained as rigorously as the soldiers of ancient Sparta, the Zulu regiments had forged an Empire in the early 19th Century. In 1848 an English traveller, George French Angas, visited their despotic King, Mpande, and painted the "savage life and scenes" on these pages.

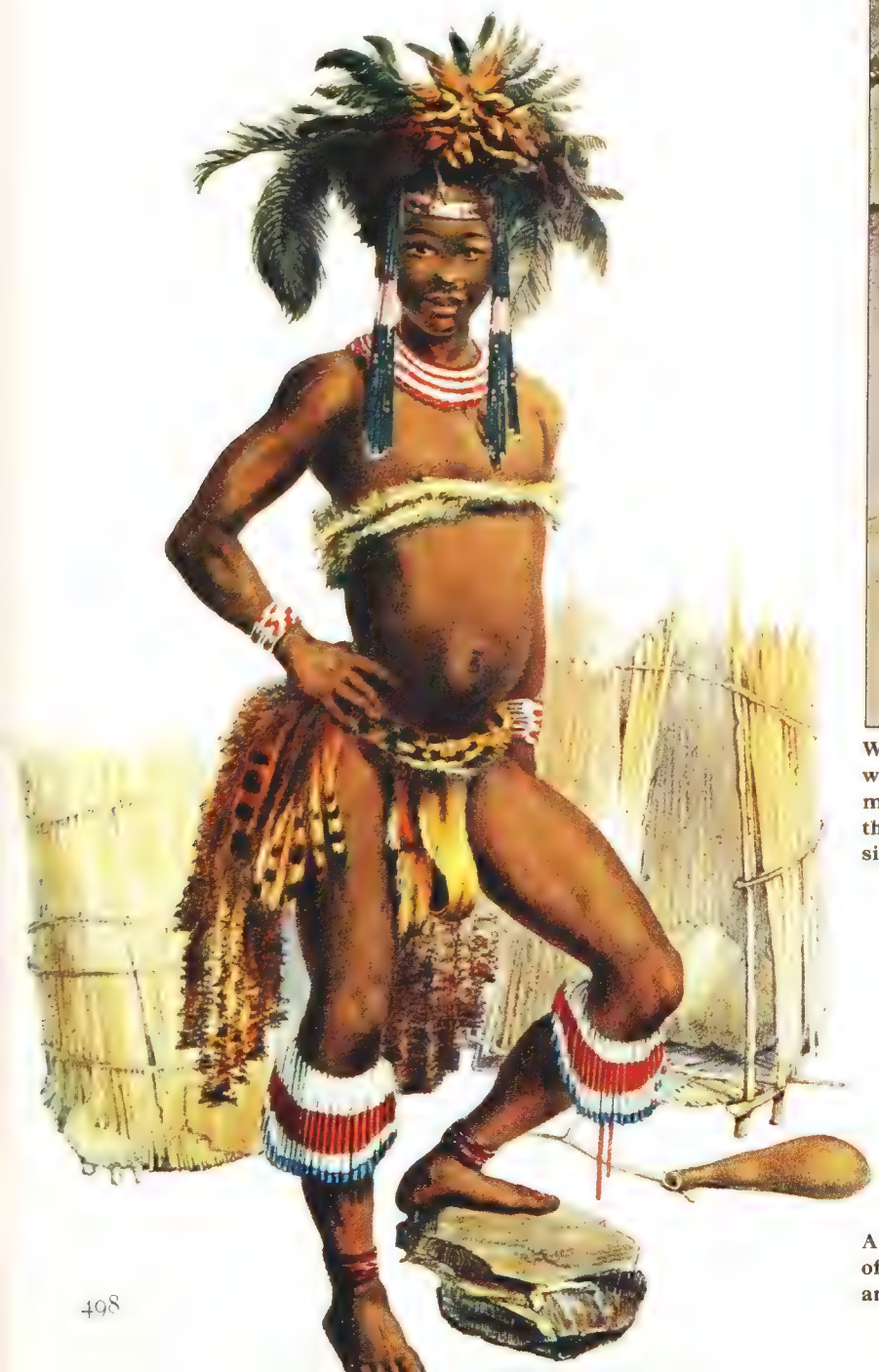
King Mpande sits in state outside his harem. He is shaded from the sun by his shield-bearer, who faced disgrace – or death – if he let one ray shine on the royal forehead.

Warriors at their Leisure

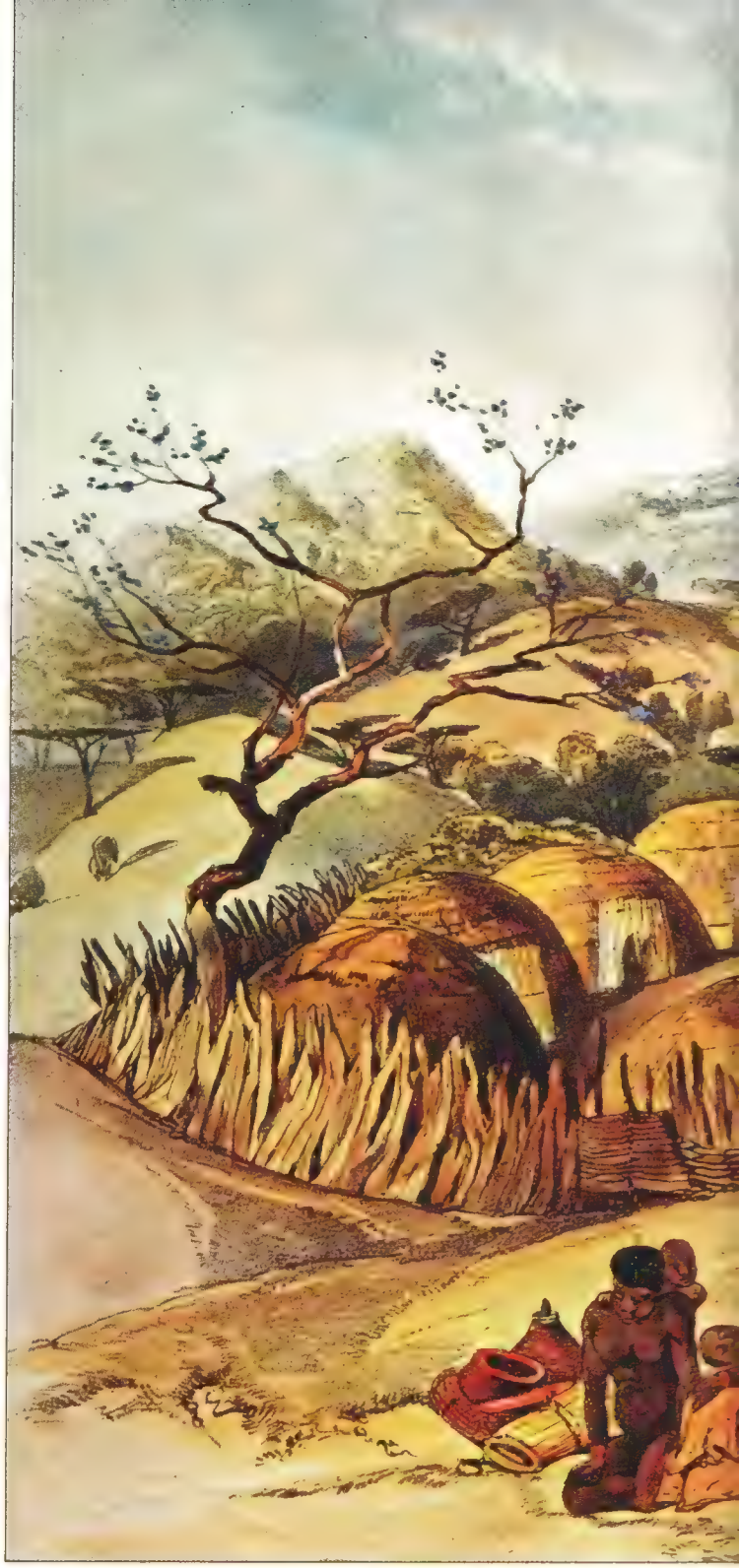
The heartland of the Zulu nation was in the fertile coastal area between the Drakensberg Mountains and the Indian Ocean. Under King Shaka, who came to the throne in 1816, the Zulus absorbed neighbouring clans until within ten years they dominated 20,000 square miles north of present-day Natal.

They lived in kraals, villages all built on the same circular plan, with a central stockade to protect flocks at night and a subterranean granary. An outer stockade defended the dome-shaped huts, which were made of basket-work and neatly thatched. The smooth clay floors were polished until they shone by the women working with flat stones.

Between wars, life in the Zulu kraals was good. After "manœuvres" at which the young warriors practised their military skills, they drank vast quantities of beer made of millet by the women. The Zulus also loved taking snuff, a mixture of home-grown tobacco ground together with ashes of aloe leaves. This too was made by the women. The men, treating snuff-taking as a ritual not to be disturbed, sat down in a leisurely fashion, carefully filled an ivory spoon and with a mighty effort drew up all the snuff into the nose at once, relapsing into a state of euphoria. As the tears started from their eyes, they gently coaxed them down their cheeks with a forefinger.



A Zulu youth poses in his dancing-costume, showing off his head-dress of black ostrich plumes, his black and pink pendants and his fine leg-fringes.



When Angas painted this view of a small Zulu kraal, it was a stormy day, common enough in Zululand where most of the rain falls in thunder-showers. To the left of the rainbow, the animal skin flying from the flagstaff signifies that the Induna, or Governor, is at home.

In this scene of beer-making, one of the women brings millet in a basket held above her head. Others boil the grain in the large earthen jar over the fire, stir it, test the quality in a cup, and set it aside to ferment for several days. Finally (right), one woman pours out fermented liquor into waterproof baskets for serving.

Conquest for Death

The Zulus' motto – "to conquer or to die" – stated their military code. If a soldier was disarmed or defeated in battle, the King had him executed for ignominy. The military life was so precarious that, when promised something, a soldier always replied, "Give it today; tomorrow I may be dead."

Under the spartan regime, all ordinary or "black-shield" regiments on active service lived in celibacy in garrison towns set apart from civil society. Only the crack "white shields" were allowed to marry. On military expeditions, all regiments slept without a shred of clothing and the King's bodyguard slept naked in peacetime as well, summer and winter alike. Zulu soldiers, it was said, could go without food as long as the vultures, and they could cover 60 miles a day on foot (they had no mounts).

Military glory was the supreme honour. When soldiers left for war, young virgins ran before them naked, promising themselves to any "black shield" who acquitted himself valiantly. A Zulu's greatest pride was his skill at warfare and he loved to demonstrate it in the war-dance, flourishing his weapons, leaping, stabbing and parrying. His clothing was designed to accentuate his ferocious appearance: plumes of crane and ostrich, streaming leopard tails, skins of wild beasts. Truly, said neighbouring clans, Zulus were "not men, but eaters of men."

Wearing finest skins and streamers of angora wool, this warrior also wears a snuff-spoon in his head-ring.

Three Zulus wait for a parade; after the war-dance, they will march past the King, stopping to bow.

King Mpande reviews his troops, calling his ace warriors from the ranks in turn to perform war-dances. A basket of beer stands by his side.

IV. Into the Jaws of Death

The Zulu King Shaka was fascinated by the first few Europeans who arrived in Natal in 1824. He befriended them and let them stay. He also signed a number of treaties with them, the purpose of which he never understood. To the Europeans who negotiated such "agreements" all over Africa, the documents represented an outright transfer of the land; to the Bantu, land was the inalienable property of the entire clan, and the most a chieftain could dispose of was the temporary use of its surface during his own lifetime.

By 1828 Shaka had become clearly psychotic. He was cruel and capricious, and had people killed for most inconsequential reasons. Like so many other military dictators, he lost his sense of proportion and also lost touch with his people. When his mother died in 1827 he had thousands butchered in her honour. Finally, his tyranny became too high a price to pay for his genius and despite the elaborate precautions he took for his own safety, he was stabbed to death by his half-brother, Dingaan, on September 24, 1828. Dingaan then took over the kingdom with the declared policy of a more moderate and tolerant rule in future.

At first, the Zulus viewed the incoming Boer trekkers tolerantly and were fascinated by their firearms and their horses, neither of which they had seen before. They were prepared to grant concessions of land in exchange for these, and Dingaan condescended – with no realization of what he was doing – to make his mark on a piece of paper entitling the trekkers to occupy and to farm certain outlying portions of his kingdom.

Dingaan found the Afrikaners odd and amusing and they looked quite harmless. For a few years peace prevailed. The settlement at Port Natal, soon to be renamed Durban, began to grow, and the Zulu kraals prospered.

But as more and more wagons came over the Drakensberg Mountains, Dingaan's attitude began to change. He demanded to know how many more were coming. No one could tell him, but his counsellors suggested there might be no end to them and that the Zulu's country would be overrun. Dingaan was also beginning to understand that the gun was a far more effective weapon than the spear and that a large number of these people all with guns might be a more formidable force than his *impis* had ever encountered before. Perhaps it was time to stop that possibility from developing. Perhaps, ran the thinking, it would be wiser to use Shaka's method of simply annihilating any possible opposition.

Word of this change in Dingaan's thinking reached the trekkers who began to take certain precautions. Each night they drew their wagons up into circles – known as *laagers* – and posted sentinels. This in itself further roused Dingaan's suspicions and he made up his mind that matters had gone far enough. He was not, however, going to risk a frontal attack against guns. He would deal more craftily with the situation.

To this end, in February, 1838, he summoned Piet Retief to his Great Place, or royal kraal, with a promise that he intended making over an even larger tract of land for the trekkers' use. Retief was warned that this might be a trap but he nevertheless thought it worth the personal risk if Dingaan should be sincere. With half a dozen others he set off. Since no one was allowed to come armed into the Chief's presence, Retief and his companions dutifully left their weapons outside the camp. And Dingaan indeed did sit and talk amicably with them.

The Zulu massacre of 280 Boers at the place later named Weenen ("weeping") was the worst of many Zulu attacks on trekker camps in 1837.

When Retief drew up a paper, Dingaan again agreed to set his mark to it transferring nearly the whole of Natal to the trekkers. Retief pocketed this and rose to go after a suitable exchange of presents to mark the occasion. It was then that Dingaan gave a prearranged signal and the little party was clubbed to death.

Immediately large bodies of troops fanned out from the Great Place to attack the various wagon circles. They moved so quickly and with such stealth that the first laager they fell upon was taken totally by surprise. A fearful massacre of men, women and children followed. The site of the massacre was thereafter known as Weenen, "weeping."

Other scattered groups, who had foolishly become detached from the two main camps, were similarly slaughtered before the trekkers could rally themselves and check the Zulu *impis*. Nearly 400 Boers perished and the survivors determined on revenge. On December 16, 1838, they drew themselves up into formation on the banks of the Umslatos River, which protected one flank, and a crescent of tightly locked wagons with thorn bushes between the wheels to cover the others. They then drew up a solemn covenant with God that if he should give them the victory they would build a church to his glory on the site and forever after keep the anniversary as a day of thanksgiving and the sign of his deliverance.

The Zulus, numbering 11,000 warriors, attacked the position in successive waves. From behind their wagons, 460 Afrikaners fired through the spokes of the wagons as fast as the guns could be loaded by the women and children. At the end of that day the Zulu dead were piled high against the wagon wheels and the river alongside was running red with blood. It was renamed Blood River, and the same name was given to the battle. The Zulu war machine had been broken for the first time and the survivors crept away. Dingaan himself escaped, but when the trekkers entered his Great Place, which they burnt, the body of Piet Retief was found. In his pocket was the document ceding most of Natal to the trekkers.

The Afrikaners set about forming themselves into a republic, with a council and a flag and other trappings of independence. This was not as simple a task as they might previously have imagined, for they were by no means united in their ideas of what form their government should take. They were inexperienced in administration and their strong, individual sense of independence resulted in many quarrels among their leaders, some of whom looked for guidance and took advice only from the voice of God which they claimed they could personally hear.

Left to themselves, no doubt they would have hammered out a workable form of statecraft, but they were not going to be granted the luxury of time. Down at the Cape the British had slowly come to realize how devastating a vote of no confidence in their colonial policy the Great Trek had been. And this rebuff was now intensified by the news that the trekkers had formally declared themselves a republic and were offering to open negotiations with Her Majesty's Government. Moreover, the Afrikaners now

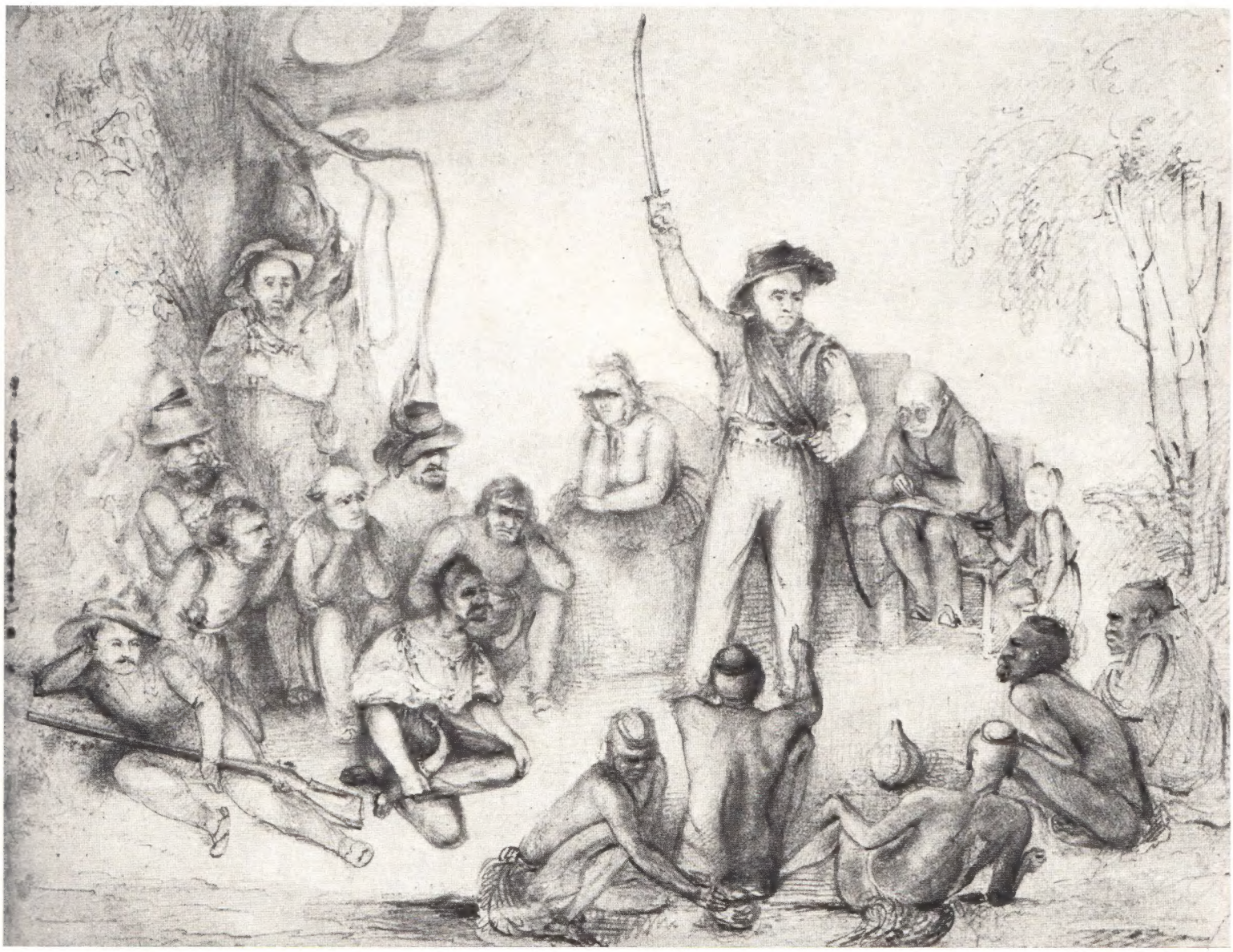
Feats of skill and perseverance, like this traverse of a ridge, were performed many times by the rugged Boers of the Great Trek and have been a source of national pride ever since.

possessed Port Natal, the future Durban and a strategically important harbour on the sea-route to India. Foreign policy was involved. The then Secretary of State in London, Lord John Russell, who regarded the whole action as a personal insult to the young Queen Victoria, issued instructions in 1841 to the Governor at the Cape to put Natal under British jurisdiction.

The Governor was now Sir George Napier, of whom Wellington thought so highly that when asked to nominate three candidates for a position of command he had simply scribbled "Napier. Napier. Napier." He immediately assembled a small fleet and troops and sailed up the coast to present the necessary papers of annexation. Again the Afrikaners came down to the beaches ready to fight. Again they were outclassed by the professional redcoats. In 1843, Natal submitted to the rule of the detested British.

Many of the Natal Afrikaners maintained their spirit of defiance and trekked westward, back over the Drakensberg to join their fellows across the Vaal River. This group, too, had been forced to fight off African tribesmen, in their case the Matabele, the dominant tribe in their area. The issue had been resolved when the Afrikaners had broken the might of the Matabele in a pitched battle near the Marico River in 1837. After their victory they too had declared a republic and were busy setting it in motion. But since they were 1,000 miles from Cape Town and did not have a seaport, the British ignored them and recognized the Transvaal Republic in 1852. In 1854, the second of the Boer republics, the Orange Free State, took formal shape.

All would have been well for this remnant of the Great Trek and their pastoral intentions but for one unforeseen factor which their good Lord had not chosen to reveal to them while guiding them to this promised land. As they unpacked their wagons and marked out their farms, built their homesteads and churches, and thanked their God for delivering them finally from the redneck, they were blissfully unaware that beneath their feet lay the world's greatest deposits of gold and diamonds, wealth that would all too soon bring foreigners flooding into their newly established homeland.



Sword aloft, Andries Pretorius, having crushed the Zulus at Blood River in 1838, forces Zulu emissaries to recognize Boer rights in Natal.

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